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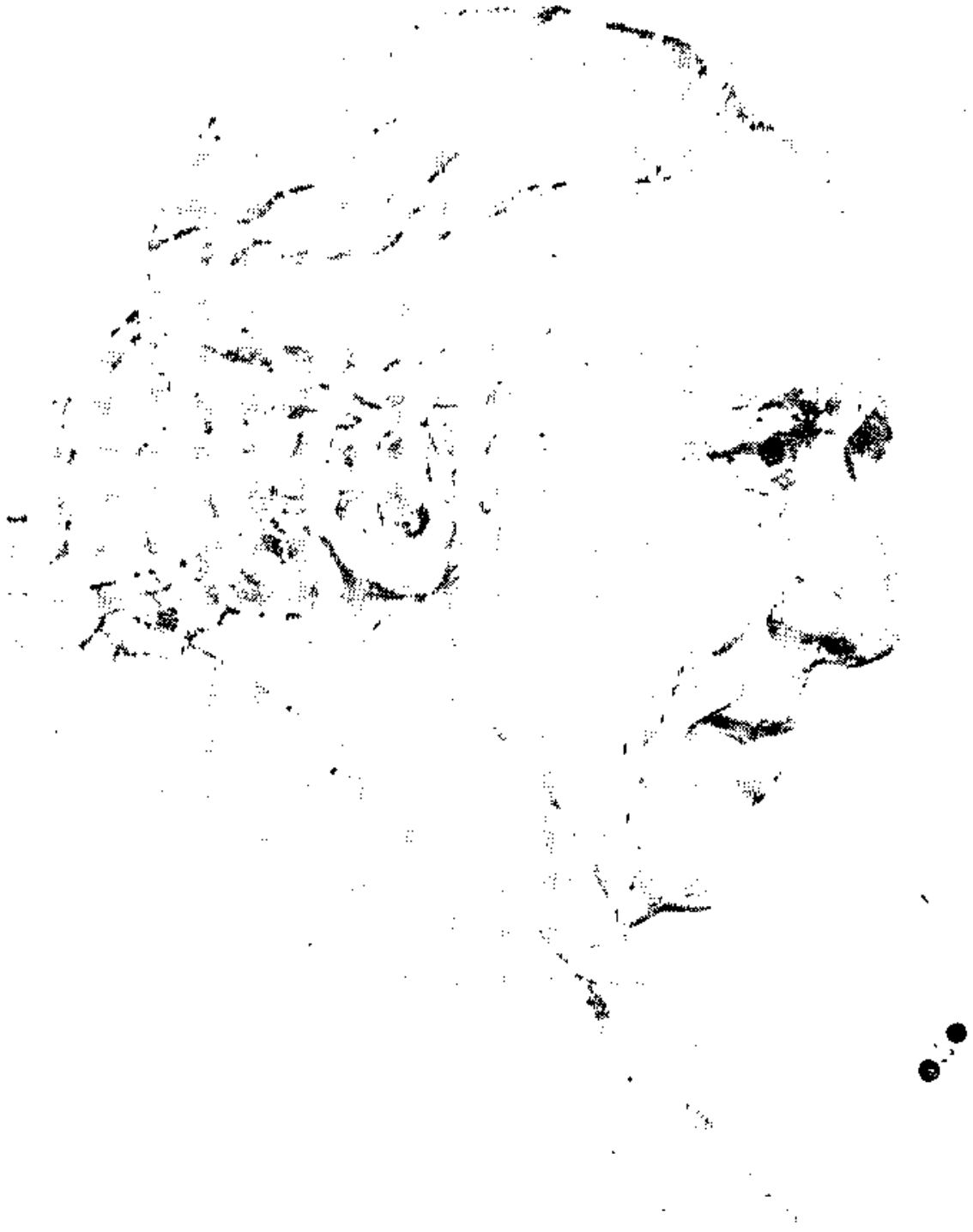

HENRY IRVING

BY

MORTIMER MENPES, R.I., R.E.

WITH TWELVE PORTRAITS
IN COLOUR

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ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK
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CHAPTER I

IN THE STUDIO

THE first time I had the privilege of sketching Sir Henry Irving was just before one of his visits to America, when he gave me several sittings.

My immediate impression as he entered the studio was of a lithe, graceful figure, in a rough pepper-and-salt tweed dress, loosely fitting, quite two sizes too large, yet falling in noble folds about the slim body. Sir Henry seemed by the greatness of his individuality to walk his very clothing into character. One felt, immediately one saw him, the generous soul of the man. Irving's was not a character that held itself aloof. His first act was to put himself in touch

with you—to win you over, to make his sympathies your sympathies, his cause yours, or yours his. When he came into the studio, he looked at the Japanese carving and Japanese workmanship all round the room, and said, "Menpes, when I produce a Japanese play I shall come to you and ask your help. I have always had an admiration for the Japanese, and a desire to produce a play situated in Japan." He added that he had often gained stimulus in his work by studying Japanese picture-books. I gave him two or three Japanese volumes containing illustrations of plays, and his criticisms were interesting to me as a painter. He seemed to lay hold of the subject from a decorative standpoint, and thoroughly appreciated the Japanese knowledge of balance. I was struck by Sir Henry's naturalness and kindness of

heart. He made one feel absolutely restful. One of the pictures was a beautiful harmony in black and yellow, with touches of vermilion. Irving immediately made me feel at one with him by saying, sympathetically, and as if I were a trusted colleague, "Imagine us, Menpes, working the Lyceum Stage on the plan of this harmony."

The morning of the first sitting was one of the most interesting I have ever spent. We sat in the studio for hours before the work began, the great actor telling story after story, each one more humorous than the last. The time sped and the light began to fade without my noticing, so magnetic was he. He talked in a deep even voice, slowly, deliberately, enunciating each word well, though sometimes mumbling in a dreamy manner, and even repeating sentences.

Then suddenly he would change his position, re-cross his legs, as if pulling himself together, and say a few words in a crisp, clear way that almost made you jump. He handled his subject in a manner that few could touch, keeping it in perfect control, never missing a point. As he talked he creased and uncreased his felt hat continually, while his bushy eyebrows were moving up and down, occasionally drawn far over his eyes.

Irving's knowledge of human nature was vast, and his mimicry of different tones of voice exquisitely amusing. No matter how good the story, he would talk aside throughout the narrative in that same slow even way. Sometimes he became so enthusiastic that he walked about the room illustrating attitudes and other tricks of manner.

All the stories were humorous. His

descriptions of friends and colleagues were very fascinating. He would make one wave of his hand in an eccentric line, and you saw the figure of the man in question.

A week or two before this sitting I had been painting M. Coquelin, whose name came up in course of the conversation. Irving raised his eyebrows, then lowered them, looked at me keenly for a moment, and said, circling his fingers round his head, "Decorative, my boy; you find the face decorative? Fine comedian, very fine comedian; but we all have our limitations, my boy; limitations." Irving then told me that M. Coquelin had spoken to him of an intention to create the part of Hamlet. Smiling whimsically, he added, "His face, my boy; his face! Coquelin creating the part of Hamlet! Quaint, quaint,

my boy; quaint." For several minutes, as he continued, Irving kept encircling his face with his hand absentmindedly. He was very amusing as he ruminated on Hamlet. He told how he and M. Coquelin had gone to see Tree in the rôle of Falstaff. M. Coquelin, he said, was in constant fear that Tree was on the point of floating out of the theatre. Coquelin kept saying, "Will he rise now? Do you think he is going to rise?" This apprehension seemed to be the one thing that really laid hold of Coquelin. I told Sir Henry that a few days before, when the Frenchman was sitting to me, we had discussed this visit. Coquelin had informed me that when he went to see Mr. Tree behind the scenes all he could do was to treat the most prominent part of Falstaff's person as a drum and beat upon it. Sir Henry declared that

Coquelin was a great artist with a fine appreciation of pictures. In fact, all Irving's criticisms were in the Frenchman's favour. The only thing that he resented was that Coquelin should attempt to take such a part as that of Hamlet. As a comedian he declared Coquelin was good, very good, but beyond that—no.

During the first sitting Sir Henry scarcely moved his body at all; but his face was alive with movement. The expression in the eyes! I have never seen anything like it. I have never seen a face change so much: not for more than a moment did it retain the same expression. Now and then he would turn round and look piercingly to see if I had caught the joke. When he was telling a story I could almost follow it by watching the movements of his face, with its

changing brows, now up, now down. Then, that wonderful mouth—how expressive the curves of it were; how sweet the smile! At the beginning of the sitting I felt hopeless. To be sure, there was the restful, graceful figure, and there were the hands. I could have drawn them; but it was the head I wanted, and that was never at rest. I would begin with the eyes—when drawing Sir Henry I always felt I must begin there;—then the brows would draw down with a severe expression; then he would look straight ahead; then, just as suddenly, the eyebrows would go up and he would smile, —a rare smile that would make anyone do anything for him. My only hope was to catch a dozen expressions and fly from one to another as his face changed, to procure a few more lines to add to each particular study. In this way I was able

as it were to get round the man and make a complete study of his many facial changes. To paint a portrait of Irving, with Irving before you in the ordinary way, in about an hour's sitting, was an absolute impossibility. His face provided very many pictures a minute: the eyebrows moved up and down, altering their position on the face sometimes by quite an inch.

At the first visit Irving took a pose facing a lighted window, in profile, his head slightly bent, listening to what I was saying, his sensitive fingers tracing feathery little patterns with a pencil on a sheet of foolscap. A grand figure he made now, with an almost dreamy expression, as he encouraged me to tell anecdotes of men whom he had known at different periods of his life—anecdotes in which he himself was vaguely mixed

up—tales of painters, actors, statesmen, poets, writers, and certain quaint schools of painters. Now and then, as anything touched him closely, that dreamy look would change to an alert gaze and the brilliant eyes would focus on me in a flash. He, in any mood, made you feel that you could talk to him quite naturally, as naturally as he talked to you. What a face it was!—grey, almost slaty—his hair iron-grey, and bunched out at the back of the head, the mouth sensitive. His entire colouring—flesh tone and hair—seemed to be a kind of iron-grey. There was scarcely any other hue at all, save that here and there about the eyes and nostrils there were touches that had a warmer tone, not the lips. By contrast to this greyness his eyes seemed to shine out of his face a vivid black. Then, those hands, rather

small and delicate and beautiful in form, yet so obviously the hands of a unique man,—they were capable hands that could not fumble.

Sir Henry spoke of his old friend Toole. His face lit up as he spoke. He told us how shocked he was at Toole's state of health; the dear old chap could scarcely speak. Toole longed to talk; but his voice was muffled and he could scarcely articulate. Irving said that the last time he saw Toole he took him to a specialist physician, with whom Toole stayed for some little time by the sea; but instead of getting better he became worse. Irving brought his friend back to the hotel. Just near there was an undertaker's shop with "Johnson, Monumental Sculptor," written up. Toole paused, and, with his thumb pointing back to the shop, shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. Noth-

ing more was said. Irving little thought that he would be the first to die.

During this sitting we had been talking of a Japanese play that was going on in London at that time, and Sir Henry told me of a Chinese theatre in San Francisco, and of his interview with a leading actor-manager. He had never enjoyed anything more. It was all very quaint and primitive; but the acting he thought amazingly good—in some parts exceedingly funny. What struck him most was the audience, which was composed exclusively of men, all with rigid faces: they never smiled. There they sat, hundreds of them, black-looking scoundrels, wooden-faced, blank, silent. If they showed any expression at all, it was disapproval of the whole performance. The actors seemed to enjoy this work immensely. The play itself,

he said, was realistic. In a scene of great pathos, and to show emotion, the actor wiped his eyes and nose with finger and thumb. After the play was over the manager courteously invited Sir Henry and his friend to the back of the stage, where they were introduced to some of the principal actors.

They were shown the eating-house, and there made acquaintance with a Chinaman who spoke pidgin English. "Why," Sir Henry asked him, "do you have this joss-house in the theatre?" The man explained that it would be quite impossible for an actor to have his meals at another house. He would have things thrown at his head in the street, and probably be killed. That was why the actor was not fond of going out for his meals. Sir Henry said he could understand the difficulty. He suggested

that the players might go about armed. The current state of affairs seemed unfair towards the stage. The Chinamen shook their heads, and said that the actor "no could go for walkee because him velly bad man; all the people say him velly bad man." "But, surely," urged Sir Henry, "you yourselves like actors?" "No, no," was the answer: "actor vagabond: we no likee: actors velly bad people: no actor a good man—quite impossible." After this, Irving said he was careful to conceal from the Chinamen the disgraceful fact that he himself was an actor. Still, he did his best to clear the character of the stage. He spent quite half an hour in trying to explain that perhaps the actor was not quite such a vagabond as they thought. They persisted that the player was "a number-one bad man who didn't love his mother."

"Well," said Sir Henry at length, "do you ever happen to have heard of a man called George Washington?" O, yes: they thought he was a very great man. "Now," said Sir Henry, "I think I can tell you of a still greater man than George Washington. Have you never heard of William Shakespeare?" "Yes," they said, nodding in approval: "he was a number-one great man was William Shakespeare." "William Shakespeare," said Irving, "was an actor." He left the two Chinamen shaking their heads and murmuring, in a dazed way, that the actor was a bad man who didn't love his mother. A few weeks after Sir Henry arrived in London he received a letter from the manager of the Chinese theatre at San Francisco. The manager had decided to take Sir Henry's good advice. He would arm the whole com-

pany. Would Sir Henry send him out a gross of revolvers, and kindly write his name on the outside, because the officials would then never imagine they were firearms, and he (the manager) would not have to pay the heavy duty?

One day at the studio Sir Henry told us a story that lasted through a sitting. It was about how he had exposed the Davenport Brothers' "cabinet trick." He explained to us exactly how that came about. He went, he said, one evening to see the marvellous brothers. Their doings were astounding. He was convinced that either they must be great scoundrels or they had really some supernatural power. Sir Henry thought them scoundrels. After that he went every night and watched every movement of the men, until he knew how to untie knots, disappear, and do all

things else to perfection—all except one thing. When the brother was inside the cabinet a piece of paper was placed under his feet, and a gentleman from the audience was requested to step up and trace a pencil line right round the feet. The brother's hands and legs were securely tied when the cabinet door was shut; yet he was able to dance, play on tambourines, fire off pistols, and reappear in extraordinary places; in fact, he got through a great deal of work. Then, when the cabinet door was at length opened, there sat the brother, calm and serene, with all the knots securely tied. He hadn't stirred. The most extraordinary fact was that his feet were in exactly the same position on the piece of paper, with the pencil line exactly traced round them. The contours of the shoes were marked.

It was obviously impossible that he could have budged an inch from his chair. This worried Sir Henry. He was convinced that there had been a trick; yet he could not make it out. Every night for two weeks he lay awake, thinking and planning until his head was like to split. At last, one morning early, an idea dawned. He went to sleep happily for the first time in a fortnight. Shortly after that Sir Henry performed the Davenport trick at Manchester before 2,000 people. It was an immense success. Sir Henry's "brothers" were perfectly trained, and the whole show went off without a hitch. The paper business was done in a simple way. Sir Henry placed a book on the floor and put his feet on it, to explain how. We could see that there was something good coming by his expression; he himself

was tickled by the thought of it. "Well," he said, "a line was traced round the fellow's feet. He got through all his tricks in the proper way. When he was back in the cabinet again, this is what my man did: he carefully turned the paper round on the other side, and with his own pencil traced another line round his feet." The manner in which Sir Henry told this story, with pantomime, was very amusing. "Yes," he said, when we were exhausted by laughing: "it was a success. The only thing that was not quite as it should have been was that, when the cabinet door was flung open and the gentleman was shown not to have moved from his chair—how could he, when the pencil-line was still traced round his feet?—instead of appearing calm and serenely indifferent, behold my man, his collar

bathed in perspiration, puffing and panting from his exertions, not being accustomed, as the Davenport men were, to such strenuous work."

One of Irving's characteristics was that he never allowed anyone to remain an enemy. I remember an incident that was a good illustration of this habit. Many years ago, about six o'clock in the evening, he rushed into a picture-dealer's in Bond Street, and asked to see the head of the firm. A son of the principal, seeing that Irving was agitated, asked whether there was anything he could do for him. Irving said, "No: I want to see your father: it is very important that I should see him." The dealer explained that his father had gone home. Would Mr. Irving call the next morning at ten? Punctually next morning Irving arrived. The principal and

Irving retired into a private room, while the son waited outside, full of anxiety, realising that something very serious must have occurred. Now, what was Irving's momentous business? He explained that he was continually meeting a lady in Bond Street, and nearly always about the same hour, who showed great resentment at sight of him. On the day that Irving had come to the gallery, this resentment was shown in such an obvious way that Irving felt he could not go on living until he had cleared up the mystery. He had noticed she entered a door that had a little brass plate over it. Irving described the door, which the dealer recognised as being the entrance to the studio of a miniature-painter. Irving began to speculate as to the reason of this woman's dislike. "Why should she hate

me?" he asked. "Can you help me to elucidate this mystery? Can you help me to appease this woman? She paints miniatures. Do you think you could interview her, and suggest that she should paint a portrait of myself—say, for 100 guineas?" The dealer immediately comforted Irving, by saying that he would send his son to the miniature-painter. The son boldly rang the bell, and the door was opened by a middle-aged lady with a very firm expression. When he had given his name, she smiled triumphantly, and said, "So you have come at last!" The poor old lady imagined that fame had arrived through the medium of the great art-dealer, who had evidently called in person to give her commissions. Eventually she was persuaded to go round to the gallery and meet the

principal. After a little preliminary conversation about miniatures, he touched on the Irving incident. The old lady stiffened immediately. She declared that she loathed the stage. She was a Puritan, and had never been to a theatre in her life, and looked upon actors as scoundrels. The dealer explained to her that she had hurt the feelings of a great soul—a really noble man. Directly she realised how she had misjudged Irving, the poor old lady sank on a settee, crying silently.

This little incident shows a charming trait in Irving's character.

He was good-hearted. He never turned people away. A dear old lady, who was in pecuniary distress, came to him asking occupation. He telephoned to his business manager, inquiring if there was any employment at the

theatre that could be found for her. The business manager answered, "Absolutely nothing—nothing at all." Irving suggested that she might look after the cats. The manager telephoned back that there were already three women looking after the cats. "Well," said Irving, "you must find her something. Let her look after the three women that are looking after the cats." That was henceforth her position at the theatre—handsomely paid, no doubt.

On one occasion Irving's generosity was ill rewarded. There was an old actress for whom he had arranged a benefit. She wanted him to be at the performance as a "draw," and reserved a box for him. At the last moment Irving found himself unable to be present, and gave his box to friends. The benefit was a great success. When

Irving began to talk over with the old actress the amount of money that had been collected, and was about to hand her a cheque, she said, "But in that account I do not think you have included your box." Irving was nonplussed for the moment; but he quickly grasped her meaning, and said, with that deferential courtesy so characteristic of him, "O, of course,—how thoughtless of me! I forgot to add the price of the box"; and with that he corrected the cheque.

CHAPTER II

MISS ELLEN TERRY'S IMPRESSIONS

"THIS man," said Miss Terry, striking a book that lay on her lap, "boasts of having known Henry intimately for over twenty years; and yet he can write like this! O, shame!" She read to me passages from what she considered the most false and foolish portions. Tears were in her eyes, and her voice shook with anger, as the author stated that Irving had posed as being a fine French scholar. "Irving," she exclaimed, "was a man who never pretended! He was utterly simple. He did not understand French, and never pretended to. If it was necessary in one of his plays to say a few French words, he took infinite pains to learn

them, and said them beautifully; but to pose as being a French scholar, when he was not, was impossible to Irving's nature."

Miss Terry showed to me a book profusely illustrated with reproductions from photographs. One, a very early portrait, she pointed out with great glee, and said, "Look there! That is how I first remember Henry. How like him it was, to be sure!" The portrait showed a very ordinary-looking young man, with a moustache, an unwrinkled face, and a sloping forehead—a person apparently without any particular individuality. "Ah," said the lady, with a smile, "how conceited he was in those days! Many a time in after years he said to me on looking at that photograph, 'Good Heavens! what a bounder I must have been.' Why, he could scarcely speak

at that time for conceit. But in later years what a difference! That young face of his was, as it were, a smooth, blank background for that of Irving the man. The drawing in the later face was his own work. Life did that for him—all the strenuous fighting and suffering of his brilliant career. Even the very shape of his face changed. The forehead became more massive, and the outline of his features altered."

I was curious to know which of Irving's different impersonations had created the greatest impression on Miss Terry, and I asked her which she considered to be his biggest success. She answered without hesitation: "His rehearsal of *The Merchant of Venice*, and his reading of *Hamlet* at the Birkbeck Institution. I came to the rehearsal with ideas, with my own

conception of the part as it ought to be played; but the moment Irving began I was hypnotised. I couldn't budge. I was enthralled. His conception of the part and the way in which he unfolded the plot were so extraordinary that all those who had the privilege of hearing the rehearsal and the reading must agree that never before or afterwards did Irving do such fine work. During the first rehearsal he read everyone's part, but skipped portions of the play, such as Ophelia's mad scene; and the power that he put into each part was extraordinary. He threw himself so thoroughly into it that his skin contracted and his eyes shone. His lips grew whiter and whiter, and his skin more and more drawn as the time went on, until he looked like a livid thing, but beautiful."

No man, Miss Terry told me, was more conscious of limitations than Henry Irving. He merged himself heart and soul in whatever character he was representing; but he never forgot his limitations. He always remembered, for example, that at the beginning of his career he had been hooted at because of his thin legs. "I suppose they would rather have had fat, podgy, prize-fighter legs," said Miss Terry. She remembered that once in America, when they were travelling, half-a-dozen of them, in a great car, she was sitting opposite him, and had an opportunity for studying his facial expression. Irving was leaning on his stick, looking thoughtful. Miss Terry asked him what he was thinking about. He answered, in his deliberate way, "I was thinking how strange it is that

I should have made the reputation I have as an actor with nothing to help me—with no equipment.'' He waved one of his hands as he spoke, and said, ''My legs, my voice—everything has been against me.'' ''And all the time,'' said Miss Terry, ''I was looking at that splendid head and those wonderful hands which he was holding out in a despairing gesture towards me, and I thought, 'Ah, you little know!' ''

I asked which of Irving's characters she considered to be his greatest artistic triumph. ''I can answer that,'' she said. ''Hamlet was by far his greatest triumph—and he knew it. It was his finest part, because it was the only part that was big enough for him. It was more difficult, and he had more scope in it than in any other. If there had been a finer part than Hamlet, that

particular part would have been his finest. His Macbeth, I consider, was magnificent. There were, of course, people who criticised. They said that Irving had not the figure for Macbeth—that he was not sufficiently stalwart. What did that matter? What does a man with a great imagination like Macbeth's want with a stalwart frame? And then look how he fought in the duel scene—fought until he was a thin grey ghost almost fading away, and yet enduring to the end with vigour."

"Many people," Miss Terry said, "considered that Louis XI. and Dubosc in *The Lyons Mail* were his finest parts. These were popular because they were obvious. But that is nothing," Miss Terry declared. "There is much action in these plays. They are planned on broad lines in simple black-and-white,

and are framed in slapdash language that anyone can act. For me, his finest parts were those in which the characters were subtly drawn and delicate. The more delicate the part, the greater his power to realise it."

When he was about to produce a play, Irving did everything himself. Although he did not understand a note of music, he would, through intuition, feel what the music ought to be, and would pull it about and have alterations made. He was nearly always right. Irving's directions to the composer were sometimes very amusing. He would hum a few bars spasmodically, with action of the hands, in a very expressive manner, and then say, with an air of finality, "Now, go and do that." Miss Terry described how the poor composer would look at her with a vacant gaze—

for she always acted as go-between—and say, "I will endeavour to carry out your instructions." "That's all right; patch it together in the way I told you," Irving would say, waving him aside. Somehow, in the end, he always helped the music. "Henry knew everything instinctively," Miss Terry added, with a smile.

It was exactly the same with the lighting and the scenic work. Miss Terry showed me drawings on the margins of an edition of *Hamlet*. They were hints by Irving as to the setting of the scenes. One would be a sketch of two conspirators; then there would be a procession of people. Whatever the subject was, every drawing showed great feeling for art, and was helpful to the practical expert.

"So it was," Miss Terry said, "with

everything. The only person who did not profit by his talent for teaching was myself. I continually said to him, 'But, sir, why don't we rehearse together?' and always he answered, 'O, we're all right! What I've got to fear are those limelight men. They're the people we've got to rehearse.'"

Irving was simple always. Often he would ask Miss Terry's advice about a part, and occasionally, when she told him that she liked his rendering, but could picture him doing it in some other way, he would try her conception, and sometimes adopt it.

She told me a story that showed the boyish side of Irving's nature. Seeing a child's paint-box and brush on a table, he took from a bowl in the room a white flower, and tore off one of the petals, making it quite a different shape,

and striped the leaves with colour. He was holding the flower in his hand and looking at it, when there arrived a friend who prided himself on his botanical knowledge. Irving handed the flower to him, and said, "What do you think of this specimen?" The friend turned it about between his finger and thumb, and said that he had for the moment forgotten the Latin name, but that it was a most unusual blossom, very rare, and he would like to take it away with him. Irving was greatly delighted at having "taken in" his learned friend so completely.

CHAPTER III

OFF DUTY

IN what may be called his business hours Irving was exceedingly diligent. Mr. Louis Austin, his private secretary and intimate friend, himself a very hard worker, used to say that it was impossible to imagine closer, more persistent, or more minute attention than Irving gave to the study or to the rehearsal of a play. His patience seemed inexhaustible. Once or twice at rehearsal he allowed himself to acknowledge that his company were not so quick in understanding as was desirable; then, letting the ironic spirit loose, he flouted and jeered for ten minutes or so, and walked majestically

away. As a rule, however, his assiduity was imperturbable, and he was inexorably solicitous for complete efficiency.

Between Irving at work and Irving off duty there was at once a remarkable difference and a remarkable similarity. Socially, he appeared to be the idlest man in the world. He seemed absolutely free from care. While anything interested him, nothing worried. He bore himself as if his leisure were unlimited. At any dinner-party where the company was agreeable he was the last to think of going home. When he did depart, even if there were signs that London was awaking once more, he seemed to feel that the night was still young, and was more inclined to "take a drive" than to seek his couch. All this while, however, his interest in things, though reposeful, was alert. A new acquaintance,

to whom, in the small hours, he was giving a lift to Piccadilly from Campden Hill, won his heart and his high consideration because an old fox-terrier, Irving's inseparable companion, nestled and rested on his friend's knees. Irving had never before known the dog to prefer anyone to himself, and after much rumination and debate came gravely to the conclusion that the youth must have a character in some way exceptionally high.

To see him at his best one had to be with Irving when he himself was host. Attached to the Lyceum Theatre there was a set of rooms in which he was wont to entertain, now and then, after the play. Behold, then, twelve or fifteen persons sitting down to a banquet at midnight. "Supper" Irving called it; but it was really a dinner of the most

stately kind. Food, wine, fruit, flowers, plate—everything in the spacious old hall was choice and abundant; the servants were as perfectly trained as the stewards on a man-o'-war. There was no fuss; no haste; and there was none of the loud chatter that so often, among the assembling or assembled guests, characterises such an occasion. About the whole affair there was a strange old-world atmosphere and dignity. The place seemed to be in the banqueting hall of a king. There sat Irving in the middle of the long table—tall, impressive, a very king to look at. On his right hand would be someone eminent in some other walk of life. On the occasion specially in mind, this chief guest was Lord Goschen. Let it not be thought that the strange quietude of the company was due to the presence

of such a distinguished man. Any considerable dinner-party nowadays is singularly lacking, in an ordinary way, in respect for persons, and is not, as a rule, checked in its tendency to chatter. What kept the guests so decorous was that they were in the presence of Irving. He radiated some subtle force before which all men became modest and even reverential.

What was this mysterious influence?

If we could answer that question truly we should solve the problem of what made Irving great. The explanation did not seem to lie in the nature of the subjects about which Irving talked. These were just like the subjects at any ordinary dinner table. Still, what a difference in the talk! To every word addressed to his guests generally, every-one listened with rapt attention. No

matter what the subject might be, great or small, Irving made it, as it were, supreme. Why? The explanation, I think, lies in the fact that he never spoke a single syllable lightly. He did not study his expressions, which were slow; but he studied his thoughts, which were deliberate and always earnest.

There, I think, we have the secret of Irving's wonderful hold over the minds of men. Although sometimes playful, jocular, witty, ironic, he never spoke without thinking. You could almost see his mind at work behind the slow and strangely weighty words. His conversation was never really casual. It was never unconsidered. Nothing was common to Irving. Everything was significant. One might almost say that the smallest things became important, even great, when he touched them.

Minds of this kind are very rare. Particularly, I think, they are rare upon the stage—for the obvious reason that anything said from rote is something that has lost part of its reality in losing all its freshness. A great actor is much more than a mimic. This is a commonplace remark; but we must note the truth of it if we would understand why Irving, in public or in private, invariably held his audience spell-bound. His intellectual interest in life was so untiring that it never staled, even when confronted with the most familiar literature of the stage. Man's character and destiny, and the workings of the human mind, were a subject so absorbing to him that what to most of us were the veriest platitudes in a play gained a new reality from his utterance. Every word he spoke Irving felt, and therefore we too were

moved. He was a regal embodiment of great and sincere intellect.

At the symposium just mentioned, some one made a satirical remark about the Broad Church. Irving was mildly astonished. "Ah!" he said, "are you, then, of the Narrow Church?" He was not in the least meaning to be "smart." He did not intend to convey any rebuke. He was merely seeking information. His mind, as usual, had been arrested by a triviality that instantly became important when all its bearings were perceived. An unconsidered remark had suggested a wide problem to Irving. The *flaneur* had no answer. He only laughed in a rather weak manner. Afterwards he said that Irving's question, and the strangely sincere tone in which it was put, changed his whole view of the subject in a second, and that he had

ceased to feel derisive about the Broad Church. Antagonism to that rather vague body had been a fixed idea with him for years; but he now saw it was a fad, a pedantic foolishness to be abandoned.

Mr. Toole, of course, was a frequent guest at these all-night sittings.

Irving, in his slow, measured phrases, had been telling about a conversation he had had with a country lad, who had been brought by his father, an old friend, to see *Faust*. "The lad," said Irving, "was a very candid critic. When I had expressed a hope that he had liked the play, he looked very serious, and said, 'Well, sir, I had heard it was a wonderful, deep, thoughtful play; but, to tell the truth, I saw nothing of that kind in it.' I answered, 'Ah, my boy, the labour we delight in physics pain;'

and I meant it, for the lad had looked at things ingenuously."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Toole, who was sitting opposite Irving. "The play was perfect. Why, Henry, I couldn't have done it better myself!"

That night, by the way, Mr. Toole, who was a master hand at practical jokes, began to be the victim of a very fine one on his own account. Just before the company were about to separate, about six o'clock in the morning, the famous comedian beckoned to a young man who was seated on the left of our host. The youth walked round, and sat down beside Mr. Toole. "Irving tells me," said Mr. Toole, "that you are a son of our good friend the Tory Editor of Fife?" "Yes." "And that you are editing the

National Review?" "Yes." "Well," went on Mr Toole, "I see that great men—Lord Salisbury, Mr. Chamberlain, Mr. Greenwood, and so on—write in your review. I, too, must write in it." The editor said he was delighted, and looked so. "What is your subject, Mr. Toole, and when may I expect the manuscript?" "O, I have no subject," said Mr. Toole. "You must find the subject, and you must write the article. I will sign." The editor was very thoughtful for a few moments, and then said, "There's a thing called 'The New Humour' going about. How would that do?" "The very thing—splendid!" said Mr. Toole, his remarkable countenance seeming even more woebegone than usual. "When can you bring the manifesto to be signed? Come with it to the theatre. Afterwards we'll go out

and lunch." "It will have to be sharp work," said the editor. "We are near the end of the month: the *Review* has to go to press very soon. But I'll come with the proofs the day after to-morrow, if that will do?" "Right," said Mr. Toole. The editor kept the appointment; but he was in a great hurry, having, he said, an important engagement a mile and a-half off at two o'clock. "I'll read the opening and the end," he said, unfolding some yards of proof-sheets. The opening of the article and the closing passage were in Mr. Toole's familiar strain of jocularity, and the editor expressed a hope that the rest might be held as read. "O, yes," said Mr. Toole; and the editor hurried away. Three days afterwards Mr. Toole was the most-talked-of man in the United Kingdom. He was the theme of astonished

leading-articles in practically all the journals. The substantial parts of his essay—those which he had "held as read"—were not at all like the opening and the end. They went far up into the mysteries of feeling, art, and even ontology, and were couched in words of extraordinary length or unfamiliarity. Mr. Toole, in short, had formulated a profound and far-reaching philosophy of humour, ancient and modern. The journals, not one of them scenting a joke, were astounded at the aggressive thoughts which gentle Mr. Toole had so long been cherishing in silence. A New Humourist, speaking in behalf of his School, wrote to the *Daily Chronicle* bitterly complaining that the great comedian, who had long enjoyed the affectionate favour of the public, had stamped so brutally on the efforts

of the young literary colleagues who were likewise engaged in the effort to amuse and cheer. The Garrick Club hummed with excitement. "I must ask you," said Mr. Toole, appearing at the editor's club, "to let me lunch with you every day for a little." "Charmed, charmed!" said the editor. "You see," explained the comedian, with his most anguished expression of face, "the fellows at the Garrick — especially Traill — persist in wanting to discuss passages in my article, and, as they don't always know how to pronounce some of the learned words I was obliged to use, I find their conversation fatiguing."

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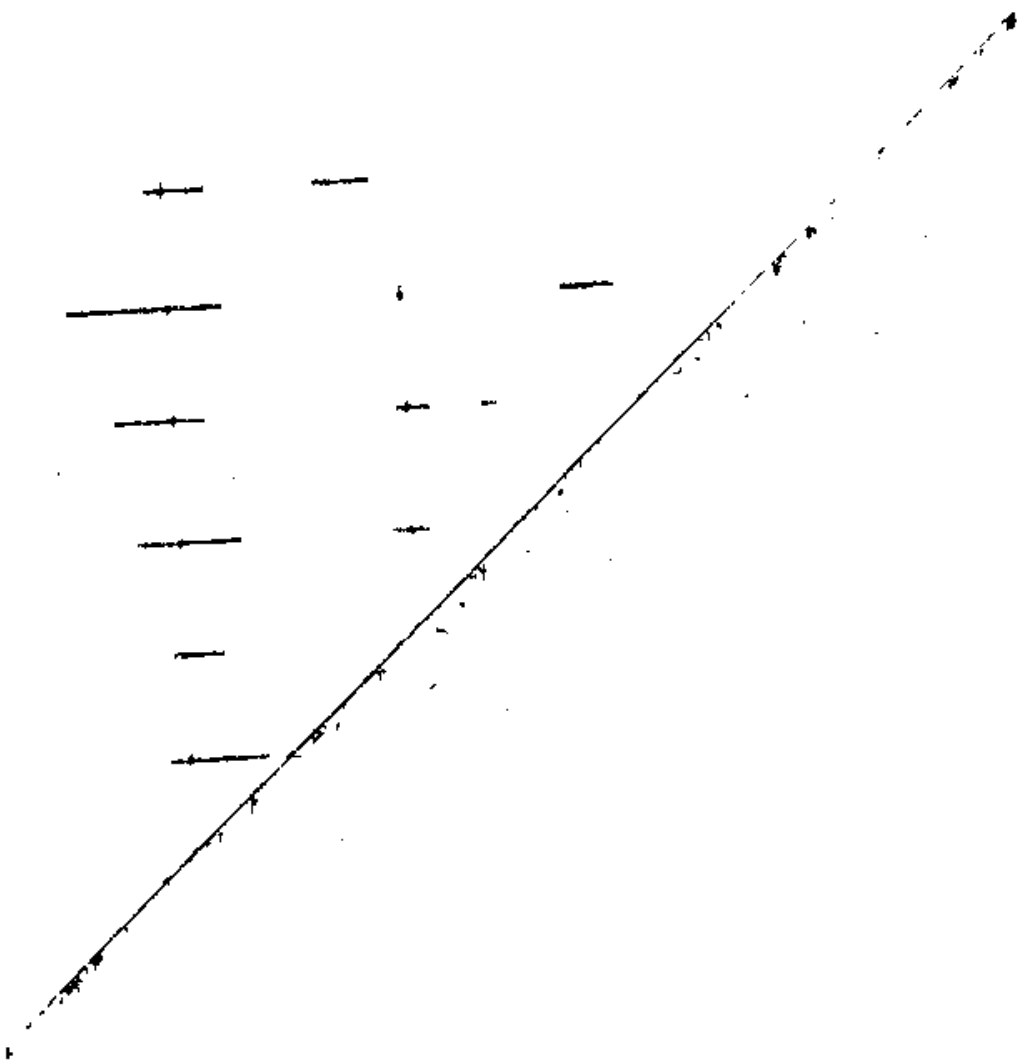

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